



VHA Innovators Network



# VHA Innovators Network **2021 ANNUAL REPORT**



VHA Innovation Ecosystem



# Welcome

Greetings,

Another (pandemic) year in the books! It is hard to believe that we have spent nearly 2 years in this strange COVID-world, but \*fingers crossed\* we are nearing some relief from it soon. One of the biggest joys for me in 2021, was the ability to travel again and see some of you in person. Visiting medical centers, interacting with Veterans, and meeting investees and iNET collaborators in person is an absolute pleasure. It is always a reminder of why I put in the hours I do and stubbornly push iNET's mission at all cost (to anyone who will listen). In July, I was thrilled to travel to Richmond to see delivery of (and complete rigorous stability testing of course) iNET's first Greenhouse investment, the portable physical therapy parallel bar prototype. In August, I was back in DC for an Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning leadership retreat and made time to meet a few very important furry iNET colleagues. Finally, in October I was back in DC for the annual Innovation Experience and a special live-from-the National Press Club Incubator session.

Navigating this pandemic has been a journey, but one thing remains abundantly clear; what we do in iNET is special. I am proud of what we accomplished during another crazy year. Enjoy this year's iNET Annual Report and thank you to all those who made our success possible.

Allison Amrhein  
Director of Operations, VHA Innovators Network



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# 2021 At-a-Glance



## February

Seven new VAMCs officially join iNET! From San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sheridan, and Eastern Colorado out west, to Durham, Orlando, and Augusta in the south; new sites and new Innovation Specialists brought even more energy to the Network.

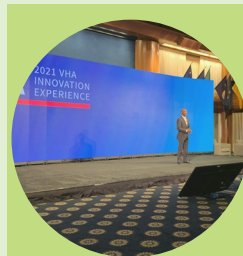
## May

Innovation Specialists participate in in-depth human-centered design (HCD) training with the Lab at OPM. HCD training puts people at the center of the process in its approach to solving challenging problems.



## June

iNET's first Summer Camp Innovation Specialist training. Specialists were equipped with new tools and methodologies on how to successfully navigate their role.



## August

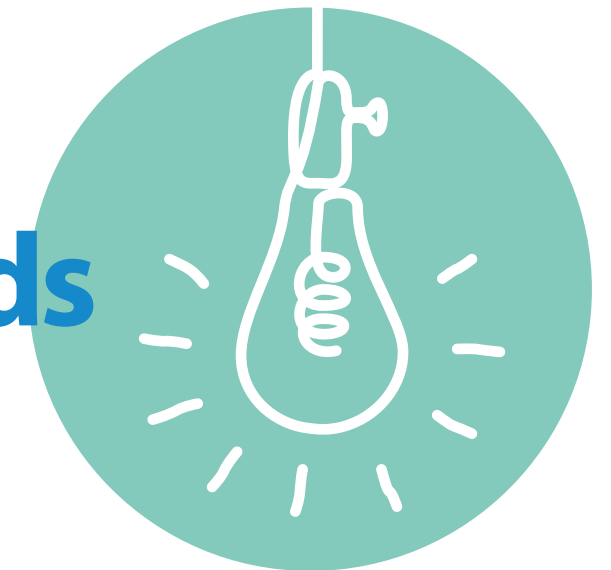
The first VHA Innovation Experience Virtual Event, VHA IE/Founder Institute Breaking Boundaries Collaboration Challenge resulted in eight Greenhouse collaborations between healthcare start-ups and VAMCs.



## October

VHA Innovation Experience 2021 featured 30+ frontline innovator demos and a live Incubator session introducing Human Centered Design and problem framing.

# Annual iNET Awards



Each year, iNET celebrates its community to highlight the accomplishments of three individuals.

The Innovation Specialist of the Year award is given out each year to recognize one of the highly trained Innovation Specialist at each iNET Site. Innovation Specialists are expertly trained leaders of their facilities' local innovation programs. As VA medical center (VAMC) employees backed with iNET teaching and resources, Innovation Specialists are well equipped to understand the on the ground challenges and meet them with innovative approaches to aid frontline employees to develop creative solutions.



The 2021 Innovation Specialist of the Year is Richmond VA's Innovation Specialist, **Kathryn Beckner**.

Kathryn not only dove in headfirst into her role after it had been vacant for some time but catapulted the Richmond program forward into action. She is deeply connected to employees at the site and tremendously engaged in building a culture of empowerment and inclusivity. She was an important component in the success of launching the Greenhouse Initiative and exploring new business models for co-designed collaborations.



The 2021 Investee of the Year Award was awarded to **Brian Higgins** from the VA Palo Alto Healthcare System. This is a most deserving recognition for a truly remarkable achievement in tech and in innovating with heart. His Smart White Cane for the Blind is a working prototype that has only improved during the Spark-Seed-Spread program.

Brian has truly embraced the experiential, iterative attitude that we prescribe to within iNET. Not only was he an exceptionally engaged Spark-Seed-Spread investee, but he was also engaged in other iNET opportunities when offered, like the Breaking Boundaries Collaboration Challenge. He came into every experience with a creative, energetic, and open mind. He is a fantastic example of the combined power of iNET's mission of engaging frontline employees and instilling in them lessons to last their entire career and how that can impact Veteran lives.



The "Tanked" Award celebrates the idea of agile innovation, ability to pivot a solution, or the incredible dedication to solving a problem no matter what obstacles arise. **Debra Cole** is the recipient of the 2021 Tanked Award.

The latter is where Debra excelled, dedication and pushing through obstacles. Debra applied to Innovators Network Spark-Seed-Spread program three times before being selected this past year. Her perseverance, attitude, and resilience finally paid off and are paying off for Veterans. Her Spark investment prototype is simple and effective; more importantly, she utilized the tools she was given throughout her iNET journey and designed her unique solution with Veterans and her peers. Debra embodies the spirit of employee-driven innovation.

Congratulations to these innovation leaders!





# The Greenhouse Initiative



Because iNET and VHA IE believe that through collaboration, we can deliver more, together; in December of 2020, iNET launched the Greenhouse Initiative (Greenhouse). The Greenhouse is an opportunity for the health care innovation community to collaborate with iNET sites throughout the country at the earliest stages of innovation.



Through the Greenhouse, external innovators can work with iNET to share early-stage innovative product designs to receive invaluable end-user feedback, develop a functional prototype or further refine existing prototypes, and conduct small-scale product feasibility testing with appropriate end users within the VHA. These collaborations can yield massive benefits for both the external collaborators and the VHA. Not only are iNET site employees given further opportunities to be involved with innovating health care solutions, which increases innovative culture and competency, but these solutions that are being designed with the Veteran population in mind could eventually be adopted into VA's healthcare system.

External innovators seeking a Greenhouse collaboration first apply and then pitch their problem or early-stage solution to iNET's team of Innovation Specialists. These 40+ individuals throughout the country have their pulse on the challenges their sites face and who they can call on to join forces with Greenhouse collaborators. It is the Innovation Specialists who determine if a Greenhouse collaboration "match" will be made and who will then lead the effort from the VA-end. In FY21, the Greenhouse supported 34 collaborations, out of the 350+ applications from external companies eager to join forces with the VA.



**"From my background in product design and user experience, these kinds of opportunities— for employees to have a critical role in building new tech that impacts their work, seldom happen at other institutions and health systems outside the VHA."**

—Brent Aguilar, San Francisco VA Innovation Specialist AND Oath Greenhouse Project Lead

## Here are four Greenhouse projects establishing the standard for collaborative innovation:

### Wareologie:

In 2020, a team of makers designed a novel portable parallel physical therapy (PT) bar device as part of a maker challenge. This novel device is a PT tool that can be easily moved to different rooms, allowing nursing home residents who are in isolation to continue with their physical therapy. This is the first functional prototype to be co-designed and created Greenhouse Initiative investment. The prototype will be user experience tested at Central Virginia VA Health Care System, in Richmond, VA, for user acceptance by an interdisciplinary Greenhouse team and Veterans.

### Able Innovations:

Able Innovations has designed a groundbreaking innovation that aims to simplify and increase the safety of healthcare staff while undertaking the difficult and labor-intensive process of transferring patients in a hospital setting. There are seven iNET sites participating in this collaboration to provide design feedback on Able's early-stage prototype. Once the prototype has been refined based on this expert feedback, the seven participating facilities will conduct user experience testing to further validate the solution.

### RIF Robotics:

The collaboration with RIF Robotics differed from most other Greenhouse, as it was purely about discovery. RIF wanted to learn and understand the pain points and inefficiencies related to reusable and single-use equipment, by observing Sterile Processing Service and Operating Room (OR) processes. The RIF Robotics team visited three separate VA hospitals to perform human-centered interviews and design research. The team focused on logistics problems in sterile processing, logistics, and OR turn-over. While each facility was unique in its infrastructure and size, the overall processes to clean, disinfect, sterilize, store, and transport surgical instruments and supplies were very similar across all facilities. This will facilitate the design of new technology in the sterile processing and/or logistics departments.

### Oath Homecare:

Oath Homecare, Veteran owned and operated, is helping Veterans to comfortably age in place through the "Oath Discovery and Design Collaboration". Oath understands that homecare may be a confusing journey for Veterans and their caregivers and is actively addressing this need through a digital platform to connect Veterans and Providers. Subject matter experts across four iNET sites work as a cohort to review current Oath products and digital services, provide feedback through meetings and surveys, and then test the newly designed VHA-focused prototype experience.



# Spotlight on programming

## The Incubator Refresh

iNET adheres to their fundamental “start small, fail small” approach not only for their iterative design approach to innovation, but also for the number of sites (34) included in the Network, which receive programming and funding resources. However, passionate and creative thinking VHA employees don’t reside at just iNET’s 34 sites, so the Network continues to extend new opportunities to support to all VA employees in their revolutionary journey to innovate.

In effort to weave innovation into the fabric of the VA, creating a more agile and creative workforce, iNET’s Incubator series, open to all VA employees, began in October 2021. The Incubator series, half workshop-half panel session, leads participants through iNET’s fundamental teachings through lecture and activities before inviting frontline employees, external collaborators, and experts to share their personal experience with the session’s topic area.

The Incubator series kicked off with, “Defining Healthcare Innovation”, on October 7th. Over 120 VA employees joined iNET leadership for discussion regarding how to define innovation within the realm of healthcare and the VA. The session introduced one of the Network’s fundamental teachings – The Three Box Solution and welcomed

a panel of internal and external leaders who shared their expert insights regarding what innovation means to them, their definition of healthcare innovation, how they promote non-linear shifts in their organizations, and their thoughts on top-down vs. bottom-up innovation.

The second session of the Incubator series, “It Starts with the Problem: Intro to HCD” was hosted live from the National Press Club during VHA’s annual Innovation Experience on October 28th. This interactive session focused on the importance of problem framing and starting the HCD process with a deep dive into the problem, which sets the foundation for all innovation work. The workshop offered methods utilized to properly frame a problem and how the problem always guides innovators to the most valuable solutions. After the 100+ attendees had the opportunity to practice framing a problem utilizing these methods, the panelist session included insightful discussion on problem framing, the importance of remaining problem focused, and the pivot that often occurs throughout the innovation process.

The third Incubator series session, “Learning to Listen: Intro to Discovery”, wrapped-up on November 4th. This session focused on the different methods that

innovators use to conduct discovery work, synthesize data, and how to convert that information into valuable insights that inform the design process. Discovery is the process of better understanding the problem from the viewpoint of the humans most affected by it, rather than from the designer’s outside perspective, so that solutions might be designed with the highest impact value. Showcasing one of Brene Brown’s talks on empathy, attendees also learned that empathy is a vital mindset to maintain during the discovery phase of the HCD process. As with each session in the Incubator series, an expert panel of both VHA and external partners closed out the session with enlivened discussion surrounding the importance of empathy to better understand the problems for which solutions are being designed.



## Farewell from Brynn Cole

“Start small, fail small” is a phrase that you’ll hear often within the VHA Innovators Network. Those four simple words carry a powerful message of permission. Permission that (almost paradoxically) forms the basis of the culture of permissionless innovation that iNET cultivates throughout the VHA. These words say: *Just try out those hypothetical ideas - in the early stages, our innovation work is insulated from impacting true workflow. Explore. See where it takes you, what previously unimaginable spaces and ideas you can co-create and test and refine and then - when you get it right - grow big.*

Since May of 2021, I’ve been afforded the remarkable opportunity to do design and innovation, leading a project that seeks to unearth and expose the fundamentals shifts brought about by the pandemic; shifts from which we can design potential new futures for the VHA. To Reimagine Veteran Healthcare. To provide new care and employment pathways for our future patients and employees by steeping the organization in belief that, at its core, healthcare is about people taking care of people - and so requires a people-powered revolution. This is human-centered design, at scale.

This work has allowed for the VHA to connect with Veterans and employees where they are: backyards and porches in Los Angeles, Houston, and Richmond; the 7th Annual National Gathering of American Indian Veterans in Illinois; and with many others across the country through virtual interviews. We’ve found a deep desire for authentic human connection, paired with tools that seamlessly enable that to occur; and that healthcare of the future is multi-player: it integrates caregivers, families, and communities as embedded partners in care. It is agile and responsive to the ever-changing nature of life. It is upstream, providing a wide menu of natural and holistic modalities available wherever and whenever people need them. And it provides new care and employment pathways, which may challenge deeply entrenched orthodoxies about how and when and where people contribute to or benefit from the VHA.

We don’t yet have the answers to what this may look like. As this project shifts into the next phase of our work - codesigning potential solutions with Veterans, caregivers, and VA employees, I think back to that simple, powerful mantra that is the mycelium of the Innovators Network - connecting us, sustaining us, empowering us. As I stretch beyond the comforts of the present, learning and questioning and reconsidering what I think I know, the permission to not get everything right the first go-round helps to root me in the belief that wherever Reimagining Veteran Healthcare takes us, it will start small. And it will continue to be hand-in-hand, together, as we iterate. And it will grow big.

Brynn Cole  
Director of Design + Storytelling  
VHA Innovation Ecosystem







# 2020-2021 Spark-Seed-Spread Investment Highlights

The goal of the Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Investment Program (Spark-Seed-Spread) is to identify and accelerate employee-inspired innovations to improve health care experiences for Veterans, families, caregivers, and employees. The class of 2020-2021 Spark-Seed-Spread investees battled the pandemic to continue the tradition of employee-driven innovative solution design and personal growth. Here are just a few of the solutions from this year's program.

## Neuropsychological Assessment Clinic Kit (NPACK)

**Jessica Alva, VA Richmond Health Care System**

NPACK is a solution to address the challenges faced by many geriatric patients who need a neuropsychological evaluation but are unable to travel to the medical center. Each NPACK includes all technological equipment required for completion of a valid teleneuropsychological assessment at home, with a remotely connected neuropsychologist, all in a user-friendly kit shipped directly to patients' homes. While developed for neuropsychological evaluations, the NPACK can be used by other healthcare disciplines that would benefit from higher quality telehealth appointments. Dual cameras, cellular connectivity, and a storage tray for sending patient materials are just a few of NPACK's unique features.



## Kyphotic Wedge

**Kevin Johnson, Cincinnati VA Medical Center**

A vast majority of Veterans seeking care at the Cincinnati VA Medical Center (VAMC) experience physically limiting back conditions, which often renders them incapable of comfortably lying flat in a supine position for diagnostic MRI. This barrier requires radiology technicians to spend the extra time and effort, oftentimes increasing risk of injury to themselves and Veterans, to utilize pillows and wedges to properly position the patient for imaging. Kevin and the project team created an innovative device that removes the strenuous labor and need for multiple technicians to properly position the Veteran, by tilting the Veteran patient backwards into a position that allows for more comfort and higher quality imaging.



## Hitting the Target: A Device for Optimal Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) for Medication-resistant Depression

**Punit Vaidya, VA Northeast Ohio Health Care**

Punit recognized a recurring problem with the current method of placement when treating Veteran patients with TMS. TMS is a treatment often used for medication-resistant chronic depression, among other applications. The current process of determining proper placement of the stimulation device relies on visual approximation is prone to errors, which can lead to stimulating areas of the brain that don't require stimulation. Punit has designed a device that improves accuracy and reliability of TMS treatment. It addresses the current problem with TMS coil placement inaccuracy by using sensors that provide objective confirmation of correct positioning, which optimizes the treatment.

## Maternity Whole Health

**Cody Giovannetti, Memphis VAMC**

The post-partum period can present considerable challenges for women who have just given birth. Included in this long list of challenges is lack of sleep, fatigue, pain, lactation difficulties, stress, new onset or exacerbation of mental health disorders, lack of sexual desire, and urinary incontinence. The maternity period should be a pleasant experience for new mothers and is very achievable, with exceptional coordination of care to help address these challenges. The opportunity exists to develop a best practice for maternity care, through a Maternity Whole Health Program, which Cody has designed to ensure women Veterans are provided the support needed to have an enjoyable maternity experience. The program consists of a Maternity Care Coordinator, Women's PACT, Pharmacy, Lactation, Nutrition, Psychology, Pelvic PT, and all Complementary and Integrative Services.



# 2021 Network by the Numbers

**1** new VHA  
IE logo  
VHA Innovation Ecosystem

**92** FY21 Innovation  
Investment  
Program  
investments

**3** 2021  
Incubator  
webinars  
**259**  
2021-2022  
Incubator  
registrants

**341** Greenhouse  
Initiative  
applications

**105** FY22  
reviewers

**210** Breaking Boundaries  
Collaboration Challenge  
applications

**143** FY22  
investments

**34** Greenhouse  
collaborations

**14** FY22 Go Fish!  
investments

**34** 2021 iEX iNET  
Demo presenters

**8** new Innovation  
Specialists

**7** new  
iNET sites

## Programming Overview # of Participants\*

**641** The 3Box  
Solution

**145** 4H HCD  
Fundamentals

**161** 1H HCD  
101

\*Individuals who earned  
continuing education  
credits via EES

## iNET Site Spotlight



Hello Readers,  
Please allow me to introduce myself as Brent Aguilar, the Innovation Specialist under the Strategic Planning team at the San Francisco Health Care System. I am excited to bring my business, design thinking, and public health knowledge to the wonderful Veterans we serve, and the world-class clinicians, front-line staff, and administrators who make it all possible.

### FY22 Spark-Seed-Spread Investees

I am very proud of the SFVA cohort looking to address important problems such as; improving SFVA and external partner communication, minimizing discomfort for endotracheal tube placement, empowering Veterans to manage their diabetes through a virtual platform, and improving access to mental health treatment studies. Each of the investees were very new to innovation but did the hard work, and trusted me as their Innovation Specialist, to challenge their assumptions and help them frame their story and objectives in a way that others could see the immense value of the problem they identified.

### Breaking Boundaries

SFVA is leading a Breaking Boundaries initiative in partnership with 3 other VAMCs. This opportunity is humbling-- seeing everything that goes into a large-scale effort such as this. Even as someone who has ran large-scale design sprints in prior roles, I have identified many of my own practices and patterns that I would do differently. I look forward to picking up more tricks as I continue to experiment with my design process while collaborating with internal and external parties.

### Strategic Planning Investees

Strategic Planning is spreading innovation within the SFVAHCS by actively partnering with SMEs and external collaborators who can bring the vision to life through co-design. As the Innovation Specialist, my main role is to

create the frameworks and help parties move through the design thinking process. High-touch opportunities like these help our stakeholders see, in a short timeframe, how the innovation process can apply to their larger work efforts - including both innovation work and broader strategy and business planning projects. I am excited to use HCD to help build the future of VA care with our teams.

### VISN 21 Innovation Accelerator

VISN 21 is running a regional accelerator to introduce staff to the discipline of human-centered design (HCD)- to creatively solve their problems while building a coalition of support around them, their vision, and prepare for future engagement with iNET. My role is to develop the accelerator's programming, education, and design templates with the help of the VISN 21 Innovation Specialists and Innovation POCs (non-iNET sites). This accelerator is testament to Katie Mosby's radical effort to break silos and promote VISN-wide innovation. I am ecstatic to develop VISN 21 innovators through this local effort.

### Growing Innovation at SFVA

I am so proud of all the work that SFVA is doing to welcome innovation with open arms. There is a lot that I'm very excited for and constantly working to offer more advance innovation services as I work to scale my impact and reach. We are spreading innovation to our CBOC network, creating tailored coaching sessions for discipline-specific groups, holding one-day design sprints with Service Chiefs, and operating as a testing site for Reimagining Veteran Healthcare under Brynn Cole's leadership. I've been told that the VA can be a "pie eating contest", well, I'm here, ready to share your pie and work together to move challenge the status quo (unless it's rhubarb pie, then you're on your own!).





# iNET at iEX 2021

The VHA Innovation Experience (iEX) returned in 2021 as a virtual series of four distinctive events that culminated in the fourth annual Marquee Event on Oct. 27 – 28, 2021. This year's theme was Breaking Boundaries: Forging a Healthier Future for All Veterans. Organized by the award-winning VHA IE team, iEX is a unique forum for government, academia, non-profit and private sector innovators to collaborate, share best practices, network, and discover new ideas virtually to help improve the lives of Veterans.

The three lead-in events that culminated in the annual Marquee event consisted of a two-day inaugural Breaking Boundaries Collaboration Challenge, an in-depth panel discussion—Forging a Healthier Future: Post Pandemic Care, and a third event—Breaking Boundaries: Using Innovation to Advance Health Equity.



The Breaking Boundaries Collaboration Challenge was the first of its kind within the VA, hosted by VHA IE and Founder Institute. The Breaking Boundaries Collaboration Challenge was a pitch competition in which external innovators had the opportunity to collaborate with the VA to advance their innovative healthcare solution to the next stage of development, in partnership with iNET sites, their expert staff, and insightful Veteran patients. The goal was to advance innovative healthcare solutions that ultimately change the lives of Veterans and the general public.

Approximately 200 external companies working on innovative healthcare solutions applied for the opportunity to pitch their ideas

to the 34 iNET sites for a chance to co-design solutions alongside Veterans and VHA staff. Twenty healthcare innovators, non-profits, entrepreneurs, start-ups, or academic affiliates at the earliest stages of solution design and development were invited to pitch to VHA IE and iNET site leadership and staff throughout the country. Innovation Specialists worked with their leadership to determine which projects were best suited for their facilities, which resulted in a total of eight collaborations moving forward with iNET (via the Greenhouse Initiative): CryoScope Medical, Leuko Labs, Inc., Oath Aging Care, Braze Mobility Inc., Stabl, Cibus Health Inc., Able Innovations Inc., Invictus and BCI Incorporated.

## Learn more about a few of these exciting collaborations:

### CryoScope Medical (CryoScope):

CryoScope is developing a medical device for Gastroenterologists, Surgeons, and Ear Nose and Throat doctors to treat patients with esophageal disease without sedation and at one tenth the cost of conventional therapies. Five iNET sites are gathering subject matter experts (SMEs) and Veterans to not only provide insights about the needs related to this treatment, but also an opportunity for Veterans to influence the prototype design. Once the discovery and design phases are complete, CryoScope will provide participating iNET sites with an initial physical prototype to pilot test on-site. Collaboration on this device could lead to an increase of Veterans battling esophageal disease to receive the care they might need, ease their recovery, and allow them another option to access care.

### Leuko Labs, Inc. (Leuko):

Leuko aims to improve quality of life and outcomes for chemotherapy patients and others at risk of severe neutropenia, through the utilization of a novel noninvasive white cell monitor, PointCheck™. This collaboration focuses on both the PointCheck™ device and the accompanying interface including a mobile application prototype for providers. VHA SMEs and Veterans, from seven participating iNET sites, will provide feedback on this device and the accompanying mobile application prototype, which could influence further iterations of the device and the strategy for clinical implementation. This will be accomplished through VHA clinical SME and Veteran feedback and discovery based on user experience (UX) testing of the PointCheck™ device, along with Veteran interviews and insights.

### Stabl:

Stabl is developing a digital health platform to help health systems optimize patient postoperative recovery and reduce hospital readmissions with real-time motion feedback and centralized care. Three iNET sites are participating in this collaboration with Stabl and will be gathering appropriate clinical SMEs and Veterans from whom Stabl will gain insights. Learning about the lives and recovery needs of Veterans, along with vital insights that will be gleaned from discussions with the clinical SMEs, is vital for the Stabl team to develop a prototype that will later be tested on a small-scale for product feasibility with participating iNET sites. Providing a tool for Veterans to recover from surgical procedures in the safety and comfort of their own homes is an important aspect of VA's goal to increase and improve access to quality care, and this collaboration may help VA get closer than ever before to reaching that goal.





The three lead-in events culminated in the fourth annual Marquee Event on Oct. 27 – 28, 2021. iEX showcased many of the groundbreaking technologies and practices that VHA IE and its collaborators are currently using to reshape American health care. With iEX’s virtual platform, attendees were able to share best practices, network, and discover new ideas that are making a real difference in Veteran lives. All iEX events were open to everyone and allowed the public, Veterans, health care professionals and innovators to connect with each other virtually and engage in fascinating panels, powerful presentations, and insightful keynotes.

The iEX Marquee Event is one of the leading health care innovation events of the year. It included popular returning programming like the iEX Talks, iEX Demos and an updated VHA Shark Tank Competition that delivered live results for boundary-breaking innovators nationwide.

As always, iNET investees shined during iEX Demos. Here is a recap of just a few demo participants representing iNET at iEX 2021:

**Natalie Mandel, VA Northeast Ohio Health Care System, Simplicity—** Making Breast Biopsies Simple: Natalie’s mammography biopsy chair, called “Simplicity”, will be more comfortable for the patient and more accessible for the radiologist, when compared to the existing options for this procedure. This chair will allow the mammography unit/c-arm to be utilized to its full potential and result in an easier and safer approach, particularly with hard to access targets. With a sleek and lightweight design, this chair will be more functional, efficient, and comfortable than current designs. This innovation will lead to a superior biopsy experience for both the patient and mammography procedure team.

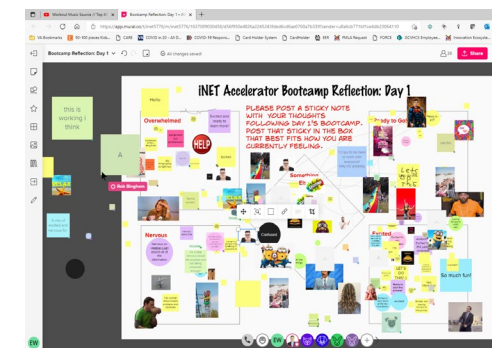
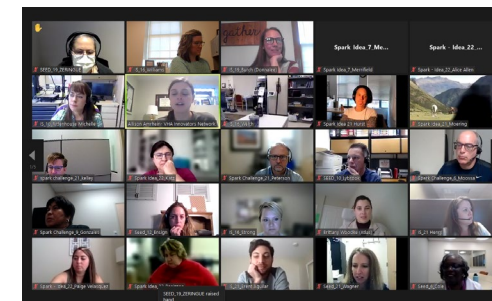
**Ronnie Major, Charles George VAMC** Text Pharmacy Enhancements: Ronnie’s project aims to keep Veterans informed and help them better manage their medications by bringing two pharmacy-related features to the existing VEText platform; mailed prescription tracking and status notifications, as well as refill reminders with reply-to-refill functionality. This project is an additional innovative enhancement to the existing VEText platform, which was an employee-designed innovation project that launched in 2015. Veterans throughout the nation are already receiving interactive VEText appointment reminders on their mobile devices, as every enrolled Veteran with a cell phone number listed in their health record is automatically enrolled in the program. This addition to the existing VEText platform will improve the capability of Veterans to manage their medications, quickly and conveniently.

**Edward Ratner, Minneapolis VA Health Care System, Power Assisted Walker—**Rising Above Seated-Only Mobility: Roughly one-quarter of geriatric patients cannot walk two blocks. Community mobility aids for such individuals are limited to seated scooters and wheelchairs. This project has built a patent-pending electric power assisted walker that can be pushed for short distances but ridden while standing for longer outings, such as to the dining room in assisted living centers or a walk in the park. It has a powered front wheel, a shoulder-width footplate and two back wheels, while a pair of anti-tip casters assure user safety. It folds flat for storage and is light enough for Veterans to handle and stow in the trunk of their vehicles. This project fills the gap for Veterans who may need some occasional mobility assistance, but don’t want to be restrained by the seated-only options currently available on the market.



# Bootcamp Rewind

## Bootcamp Kicks-Off the Investee Class of 2021/2022



Creating opportunities for VHA employees to address frontline challenges and turn ideas into reality is one piece of what iNET does best. The Network engages VHA employees through a three-tiered evidence-based Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Investment and Accelerator Programs. iNET identifies deeply committed employees via an idea competition (Spark-Seed-Spread), then trains them to design differently as they develop and implement innovative solutions that improve Veteran health care (Accelerator).

Each year, a new cohort of employees’ kick-off their innovation journey by attending Accelerator Bootcamp, which took place [virtually] this year November 16-18. During this three-day event, investees had the chance to get to know

one another via fun icebreaker activities, kicked off their investment level Accelerator cohorts (Sparks, Seeds, & Spreads), learned the fundamentals of iNET, met VHA leadership, and had fun interactively learning what the upcoming Accelerator program year will look like. Bootcamp attendees learned the ideas they will be exposed to and relationships they’ll create during their time with iNET are intended to both assist them in launching, refining, and growing their specific project and to provide them with new tools to be leveraged throughout their career and lifetime—embracing the ongoing, everlasting spirit of true innovation.

Over the three-day event, investees were inspired by how grateful VHA employees are to be involved in a cohort of passionate employees looking to innovate solutions that improve Veteran care. Two anonymous investees shared, “there are so many ambitious people with fantastic ideas working in VHA!” and “there are a lot of good ideas being brought forward by people who want to improve service to Veterans”. Additional feedback from attendees showed how eager the cohort is to continue networking and connecting with one another, to not only continue to inspire one another, but to pool resources to make big impacts as they build the future of Veteran care.



## Introducing Aspen Labs

During Bootcamp, investees were introduced to this year’s Accelerator Program consultant- Aspen Labs. Aspen Labs blends thousands of hours of in-the-field design and innovation development with a deep understanding of the research and science backing it. They’ve developed infrastructures such as innovation labs, internal design teams, and training programs to make it real and make it stick. Investees are excited about the year ahead. One investee commented, “Aspen Labs rocks! Even though I got to spend only one hour in break-out with them, I really felt validated and that we are speaking the same language. It was refreshing! Kudos to iNET team for pivoting to Aspen Labs for this year!”



# Look Ahead to 2022

## From the Director's Chair: Igniting a Revolution

Earlier this year, I published an article in the American College of Healthcare Executives Journal of Healthcare Management, entitled: "Investing in the Front Line: Leading a Cultural Innovation Revolution". It was the perfect opportunity for me to profess my deepest beliefs and desires for the state of this Network. It was my shot, for your Hamilton fans and I was not throwing it away. In the article, I called out VA's historically strong affinity (and success in) for traditional research, but how to truly delivery world-class healthcare at the enormous scale we do, requires a different type of innovative workforce and leadership that is skilled and engrossed in the opportunities that result from calculated risk-taking. We need revolutionaries and an army of them. iNET's new vision is to lead the cultural revolution in which innovative thinking and doing can lead to endless possibilities.

iNET executes its mission with one mantra in mind: "Think big. Start small. Fail small." The failure aspect is critical to the success of the cultural revolution. Because iNET operates outside of the day-to-day operations of VAMCs, the employees' innovation activities do not compromise patient care. Revolutionaries can experiment and test their ideas safely—iNET provides the space to fail, and that is special. At the largest integrated healthcare system in the United States, iNET sees failure as a negative experience only if you do not learn from it. This is a radical shift. Imagine the raw power of 225,000 uniquely qualified individuals who are given the tools and permission to make a healthcare system better. What a tremendous opportunity for VA to be a place where visionaries and dreamers want to work.



In the next year, iNET's revolutionary forces will be expanding and accelerating forward. We will offer a new 4-week national programming series, Ignite, available to all VA employees in the spring. This series will fire employee's innovative spirit. Our reserve forces (aka our iNET Spark-Seed-Spread and programming alumna) will be strengthened. We will launch a plan for a newly reinvigorated Alumni Network, with fresh networking, competency-building, and collaboration opportunities just for alumna. We will unleash our new iNET Product Pathway; a two-pronged trail for investees and alumna to follow for either commercializing their innovative solutions or intrammercialization (yes, I just made that up) of their innovative solutions; the manufacturing and wide scale utilization of their non-patentable, but innovative and extremely useful to VA, solutions. We need to see more of our homegrown innovative products in use throughout our healthcare system and this is the year iNET makes it a priority.

Through new chances for frontline employees to participate in the innovation cultural revolution, solidifying our reserves, building more collaborative opportunities with our healthcare allies, and much more in 2022; iNET will continue to empower frontline employees and revolutionize a caregiving culture. This radical empowerment is just one small part of VA's greater mission: to care for those "who shall have borne the battle" and their families, caregivers, and survivors. That is why every VA employee comes to work every single day. In the end, we are all united, passionate, and committed to the cause. And isn't that what enables a successful revolution?





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VHA Innovators Network